

*Stephen⁶⁴⁰ Baxter To
John Baxter Juneth 1788*

S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT CAMBRIDGE, MAY 5th, 1788

ON OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF

Mr. EBENEZER GROSVENOR,

STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY.

PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF HIS CLASS.

By ISAAC SMITH, A. M.

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A
S E R M O N.

J O B, XIV. 2.

HE COMETH FORTH LIKE A FLOWER, AND IS CUT
DOWN.

AN affecting instance, in which these words have been exemplified, has led me to the choice of them, as a subject of our meditations at present. The providence of God, of which we ought not at any time to complain, having seen fit within the course of the last fortnight to cut off a member of the University, in whom the fond hopes and affections of his family were strongly concentrated, and who would probably have distinguished himself by the part he acted, had he been permitted to enter upon the theatre of life, in the full vigour of youth, and just at the close
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of his academical studies, I could not refuse to express a proper degree of sympathy with his contemporaries in standing, to whom his agreeable qualities had endeared him, and whose minds appear to be deeply affected with it, by endeavouring, at their desire, to lead them into a due improvement of this melancholy event. And may God enable both me to speak, and you, my younger friends, to hear in such a manner, as that it may not be unprofitable to either of us.

Often as our attention is excited by it, yet how striking notwithstanding, when we seriously contemplate upon it, is the brevity of human life! Even at the longest it is but short, a mere nothing compared with eternity. "Man," as Job in such mournful accents complains, in the first verse of this chapter, "that is born of a woman, is of few days, and full of trouble." But in innumerable instances, it falls far short of our expectation. Many of the children of Adam die, almost as soon as they see the sun; their birth and death follow each other in close succession; they

they are as it were only the creatures of a day. Many leave the world in infancy. Others survive this hazardous period, and enjoy the sports of childhood for a while, but on a sudden they are taken hence, and an end is put to their innocent gaiety and mirth. Others are permitted to grow in stature, to make some progress in intellectual knowledge, to put forth a few opening buds, and promise fair for maturity ; but ere long the chilling hand of death nips the tender plant, just perhaps as it begins to blossom, and changes the delight and joy of its parents into a source of bitterness and grief inexpressible. Some either reach the verge, or tread upon the floor of manhood ; they appear healthful and strong, and we imagine them almost incapable of feeling the force of any particular disaster, but at the instant, it is not impossible, when we are least apprehensive of such an accident, some circumstance proves fatal to them ; a rapid fever seizes upon them, and quickly consumes their vitals, or by some other means as little expected beforehand, but to which resistance

resistance is as fruitless, as in the former case, they are removed hence, and scarcely begin, we find, before they have finished their career. Experience teaches us, that as for man, his days are as grass ; “ as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth.” “ The grass withereth, the flower fadeth.” “ He cometh forth,” according to the language of our text, “ like a flower, and is cut down ; he fleeth also,” it is there added, “ as a shadow, and continueth not.”

In such early instances of mortality, there is something strangely mysterious to human view. Why, in the midst of that agony and distress they sometimes occasion, we may be apt to ask, are our hopes thus deluded ? Why is the dear object of our delight thus early removed from our embraces ? Why is the fond parent obliged to mourn the loss of his child, for whom he felt the tenderest affection, on whom he relied to be the support of his declining years, and who promised to continue his name in the world after his own departure from it ? Why does divine providence

dence introduce any of the human species upon the surface of the globe, form them with capacities of knowledge, of improvement, and service to their fellow creatures, and while they are preparing to act their part, or the moment they have entered on the stage of life, at once bid them to quit the scene, and deprive society of the advantages it might expect to reap from them? These are intricate enquiries, nor is it easy to solve them entirely to human satisfaction. The will of heaven, we are bound by the dictates both of reason and revelation to believe, is perfectly just and wise, and resignation therefore in such cases is our duty. But we may learn something methinks, moreover, even from such afflictive dispensations as these. They are calculated to produce some useful reflections in our minds. And if duly considered, if the voice of sober reason on such occasions be attended to, and care be taken to improve them rightly, they may tend to our advantage, and give us reason for the devoutest thankfulness to our heavenly father, "who chasteneth us not for his pleasure, but for our profit," in the issue.

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In the first place, we are thus more effectually reminded of the uncertainty of our continuance here. With all the variety of warnings that are given us, we are prone enough to forget our frailty, and to live as if we had any real ground to imagine, that our residence in this probationary state would be much longer and more lasting, than it is commonly found to be. And were we always sure of arriving at what is commonly called old age, or even of reaching the meridian of our days, we should probably be much more thoughtless and inattentive about the subject of our dissolution, than we now are. But the more thoroughly to remind us of it, and the more deeply to impress upon our minds a proper sense of this truth, that we are frail dying creatures, who have here no continuing city, but are liable every moment to be removed hence, the young are frequently made our monitors, as well as the old. The arrows of death are levelled indiscriminately at both; no age is exempted from the stroke of the last enemy, that so we may always be apprized of our danger, and led suitably to reflect on the period, that will

will be put, we cannot tell how soon, to our present mode of existence. Is it possible even for the most secure to remain wholly insensible of their situation, or of the precarious tenure on which they hold their residence in this world, together with all their earthly enjoyments, when they see those whom they least suspected to be in hazard of meeting with any event of this kind, the young and healthy, the vigorous and active, are subject to the attacks of pain and infirmity, and liable, as well as others, to become monuments of human frailty?

Secondly. Early instances of mortality teach us the vanity of all human expectation. Were we accustomed to set a moderate value on life and its enjoyments, we should not then stand in need of any mortifying lesson to lessen our attachment to them, and to teach us how vain they are. But forgetful of the uncertainty, with which the possession of them is always accompanied, it is our fault in general to esteem them at too high a rate, and to presume on their duration, as if it depended merely on

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our own pleasure. In youth more especially, we dream of nothing contrary to our wishes; of no unpleasing or unpropitious event whatever, as likely to befall us; we look forward to years to come; every thing about us wears a gay and flattering aspect; we entertain ourselves with the prospect of future happiness, and anticipate the pleasure to be derived from those external objects, that court our eye, and are formed as we imagine purely to gratify our senses. In this respect indeed, we are prone to self-deception, not merely in the days of youthful hilarity, but even when we have had sufficient experience to teach us, that it is our duty to check the sallies of an exuberant fancy; when it may be supposed that age has matured our judgment, and enabled us to exercise our rational faculties with greater discernment. We think but seldom of the possibility of losing any thing we possess; we look upon danger as at a distance, and are still extending our views forward, elated with the idea of new and higher scenes of gratification, when perhaps it may not be long, before
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the object of our wishes is withdrawn from us, and we ourselves are summoned to bid a final adieu to every sublunary enjoyment. Even the wisest are not exempt from this foible. In pity to survivors therefore, to cure them of this weakness, to correct their fondness for the joys of sense, when it begins to grow exorbitant, and lead us to consider the present life, with every thing relating to it, or connected with it, in a juster light, than otherwise we should do, heaven sometimes may see fit to visit us with examples of human frailty, among those around us, in whom we were most interested, or whom we thought the least likely to become such. When it pleases the righteous Sovereign of the world, the supreme and all-wise Arbiter of events, to deprive any of "a son in whom they delighted," to take from us a near friend or connection, while in the bloom of health, and vigour of youth, in how striking and forcible a manner does this shew us the vanity of things seen? The removal of those in earlier life, whom we passionately loved and esteemed, is a powerful lesson to us, not to build too high our hopes, as well as
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not to depend too much on the continuance of our own lives, or being in this world. It points out to us the insecurity of each of these, and with a species of eloquence, far more persuasive, than words can furnish, it urges us to "set our affections on things above, not on things on the earth." If the friendly admonitions of this sort, that are at any time given us, are productive of such sentiments, as these are; if they beget in us a pious indifference to this world, and raise our hopes and desires to better objects, than any, with which we are conversant here, their effects then must be truly beneficial; we shall enjoy life the better, more rationally than otherwise, and become less subject to the pain and anguish of disappointment.

Thirdly, Early instances of mortality may be designed the more fully to convince us of the connection between this life and another, to which the present is an introductory scene, and for which it is chiefly meant to be preparatory.—Other examples of frailty may be capable of instructing us in this important truth, but the death of a young person seems
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to carry with it a more sensible demonstration of its reality. If annihilation followed the loss of our breath, and death at once put an end to our existence for ever, we might then with some colour of reason remonstrate in that kind of language, "remember how short my time is; wherefore hast thou made all men in vain!" But can this supposition be admitted? Other animals attain the utmost limits of perfection, of which they are capable, before they make their exit. With man this is not, at least in general the case. And has he alone his limits? Of all the various species, we see on the surface of this terrestrial globe, is mankind the only one that must become extinct, before it has attained to that degree of excellence, for which it was evidently framed? Can the author of nature, who does nothing in vain, who in all his works has discovered the same harmony and regularity of design, who has the same benevolent ends in view in every thing he does, have made creatures of such a rank, with powers superiour to the inanimate and vegetable, to the sensitive and brutal part of the creation, merely to exist a while in the present state, to display

display the skill of their Creator for a momentary space of time, and then perhaps at the period, when the mind begins to open, or the faculties to enlarge, and promise a display of something answerable to their native dignity and excellence, like the vernal bud, nipt by an untimely frost, drop into non-existence? It cannot be. From such premises, we must draw a different conclusion, if we judge rightly. Creatures, such as we are, endued with intellectual capacities, were intended for a much longer duration, than that, we often see to be comprehended within the bounds of human life. "This is the bud of being, the dim dawn, the twilight of our day."—"Reason points out an hereafter; it intimates an eternity to man."—We have within us evident forebodings of an after life. And the kind parent of the human race, we may humbly presume, will not disappoint our fond hopes and expectations on this head. Revelation asserts the contrary. A few years continuance in this world is not all, that providence has allotted to us. The author of our being has placed us here, as in a state of discipline

discipline and probation. And if during this uncertain, temporary scene of trial we behave well,—if we discover a laudable ambition to fill up the term of our existence here, with manly, virtuous, and beneficent deeds,—if we aim now to cultivate such dispositions of mind, as will lay a rational and proper foundation for our future contentment and happiness, we need not regret our present frailty; it will ere long prove a matter of little consequence to us, whether our lives have been longer or shorter; the same all-gracious Being, who at first brought us into life, and yet supports us in it, will continue his regard to us, when we leave the world; of his infinite mercy, through a redeemer, we shall reap the rewards of well-doing in a better life, and be introduced into a new and nobler scene, where we shall not only have fuller scope for the exercise and enlargement of all our mental powers, but enjoy the exquisite, ineffable pleasures arising from the contemplation of the best of all beings, from a nearer conformity to him, in his moral excellencies, from a sense of his love, and from a consciousness
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that our happiness is continually increasing in proportion to the improvement of our capacities and knowledge, and will never know an end. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again to a lively hope, by the resurrection of his Son from the dead; to an inheritance incorruptable, undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for us."

To his fellow-students, and to those of you more particularly, my beloved young friends, at whose request I have now been speaking, who lament that you have lost a contemporary in life, a companion in the course of your literary pursuits, and one whose intercourse with you was pleasing, during your residence in this place, now near expiring, let me recommend these considerations. Let not his death be useless to you. Consider it, as meant at least partly for the benefit of you, his survivors. Let it make you sensible, how frail you are. Let it keep you from being too sanguine in your expectations, with
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regard to any thing in this world, since you know not, as is evident in this instance, what shall be on the morrow, and see, that your life is but as “a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” Let it lead you the more seriously to reflect, on the connection there must be between this life and another, and induce you to resolve, by the aid of God’s grace, that you will make the best use you can of the present life, so long as it is continued to you. For if this be the great object of your solicitude and concern, if, as I doubt not you will be, you are wise enough to look upon the present state as preparatory to another, and one of longer duration, the happiness of which is dependent on the manner of your behaviour here,—if in fine, you recollect, that you are heirs of immortality, you will in this case come upon the stage of action with greater advantage—and will probably be more useful in your sphere ; you will be more intent on the prosecution of your duty both to God and to your fellow creatures ; you will not be uneasy, whether you are destined to remain a long-

er or a shorter space of time, in the present world, but will chearfully acquiesce in the will of divine providence, whenever you are called to leave it.

“Virtue, not rolling suns, the mind matures.

“That life is long, which answers life’s great end.

“The time, that bears no fruit, deserves no name.

“The man of wisdom is the man of years.”*

To conclude. Let us all attend to the voice of providence in this, and other instances, with which we are made acquainted. Let us remember the uncertainty of life. How soon we may be bid to quit the present scene, ^{we}

* The young gentleman, whose death occasioned the publication of this discourse, was seized with a nervous fever, and died at his father’s house, in Harvard, in the 21st year of his age. He was son of the Rev. Mr. Grosvenor, for several years the worthy and exemplary pastor of the first Church of Christ in Scituate, and since of that in Harvard, who fell a victim to the same disorder within a few days after the decease of his son, and whose sudden and unexpected removal from them in this manner is both deeply felt and sincerely regretted by the people of his charge. Another of the family was attacked at the same time and lies dangerously ill, but it is hoped will survive.

we know not, nothing can be more indeterminate, with respect to us I mean, than the length of our earthly existence. It behoves us then, in time to provide for the security of our future everlasting interest. Oh ! let not any of us suffer the precious moments of our lives remaining to us, to pass away unnoticed and unimproved. Let us act, as candidates for eternity. Let us obey the will of God, and fulfil the duties incumbent on us, in the various stations and relations of life, in which we are placed. So shall we add to our temporal felicity, and so shall we be prepared for that final event, which is the certain lot of all, though the precise period of its approach is known only to him, with whom is "the number of our months, who has determined our bounds that we cannot pass ;" and "who worketh all things according to the counsel of his own will," even "the only wise God, the king eternal, immortal, invisible, of whom, and through whom, and to whom are all things, to whom be glory for ever. AMEN.

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24 JUL 68